

THE 1981 ROLEX AWARDS



AFRICAN CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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As a result of field explorations between 1976 and 1980 in the equatorial African countries of Gabon, Cameroun, and the People's Republic of the Congo, I have become convinced that a large amphibious animal, as yet unknown to science, exists, or did exist until very recently, in certain remote areas of these countries. Specifically, I believe the two most promising areas for exploration are a region in northern Congo, near the headwaters of the Likouala-aux-Herbes River, and the vast region of lakes and swamps bordering and extending south from the lower Ogooué River in Gabon. I wish to return to one or both of these regions to verify the existence or non-existence of this animal, and, if it proves to be a real animal, to establish its identity. In Congo, this creature is known as *mokele-mbembe*, in Gabon as *n'yamala*.

Cryptozoology—the search for animals heretofore unknown to science—is slowly but inexorably evolving from the status of a “monster hunt” into a serious discipline. No doubt the recent discovery of such living fossils as the *Burrmys parvus* in Australia and the “extinct” Pleistocene peccary in South America has greatly accelerated this process.

Reports of a large amphibious animal with a long neck and a long tail have emanated from the region of equatorial Africa—roughly the tropical rain forest zones of the above-mentioned countries, plus Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic, and adjacent portions of Zaire. Such reports date back at least to accounts by early French Catholic missionaries published in 1776. More recently, German explorers in 1914 and 1938, French explorers in 1934, Scottish explorers in 1932, and my own explorations from

1976 to 1980 have recorded reports of this apparent beast. During 1976, while studying rain forest crocodiles in Gabon and Cameroun, I collected much new information in the form of first-person reports, important local historical tales of encounters with the beast, and vivid descriptions of surprisingly similar consistency from one location to another.

In 1979, I returned to Gabon to follow up the leads obtained during my 1976 expedition, and in the early part of 1980 I made an expedition to the northern part of the People's Republic of the Congo to search for the animal. On the latter expedition, accompanied by Dr. Roy Mackal, a month was spent in the bush in northern Congo, with Impfondo on the Ubangi River as our initial base. Here, at the location of an American Protestant mission, we found the tradition of the mokele-mbembe to be ubiquitous. By questioning numerous informants, we learned that a mokele-mbembe had, about 100 years ago, inhabited a deep pool downstream on the Ubangi, and we were told that, if we really wanted information on the beast, we should go to Epena, a village approximately 50 miles to the west.

We visited the deep pool by day and night without encountering anything unusual, though we did find the alleged favorite food of the mokele-mbembe, the malombo, to be abundant there. Exactly as described by earlier German accounts, it is a liana with a milky-white sap, white blossoms, and nut-like fruits about apple size. Specimens were collected and subsequently identified as belonging to the genus *Landolphia*.

After some effort, we also received permits to visit Epena, which was reachable only by walking overland through 50 miles of swampland. There we spoke with numerous inhabitants who claimed to be eye-witnesses to the beast and who provided us with specific directions to where we might most reasonably expect to find the mokele-mbembe—Lake Tele. This lake, about 4 miles in diameter, is located about 25 miles west of Epena. Unfortunately, with visas due to expire and time too limited, we had to leave the area for the long and uncertain journey back to Impfondo, and thence to Brazzaville, thus turning back only 25 miles from what may have been a remarkable zoological discovery.

I wish to return to Congo, go to Epena with more ample time, and set up a base camp at Lake Tele. From that camp, I wish to explore the lake itself as well as certain adjoining waterways, such as the Bai (or Tebeke) River, which figured in the reports of our Epena informants.

The animal I seek is described in a way that suggests a body similar to a *Diplodocus*, of massive size, water dwelling, and capable of stopping the flow of a stream when it stands up. Local people are terrified of it, some even to the point of refusing to discuss it. If it is truly there, I wish to find it, and make it known to the world of science.